

Bauman and Obirek's *Of God and Man* and *On the World and Ourselves*

Of God and Man by Zygmunt Bauman and Stanislaw Obirek. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015. 126pp., £14.99 (p/b), ISBN 9780745695693

On the World and Ourselves by Zygmunt Bauman and Stanislaw Obirek. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015. 199pp., £15.99 (p/b), ISBN 9780745687124

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Time and experiences have a way of bringing people together. Two individuals who, twenty years ago, did not have more in common than the fact of being both Polish, have crossed each other's paths to embark on a conversation about the secular, the sacred, and themselves. Zygmunt Bauman, renowned sociologist and philosopher, and Stanislaw Obirek, former Jesuit priest, and presently an academic theologian and cultural historian, debate the nature, the condition and the practice of dialogue in our present post-secular world. These two books, a series of discussions on various philosophical, theological and sociological topics, offer an insight into the core problems of, and potential solutions to, the current multicultural, liquid and globalised environment that surrounds us.

Of God and Man presents both thinkers' views on the hopes and limitations of religious belief and interreligious dialogue. Bauman and Obirek analyse the obstacles to understanding the other, and the possible bridges for overcoming the religious divides. A concern that travels throughout the whole book's conversations is the danger of fundamentalisms. They discuss the issues that arise from being deaf to alternative points of view, and the unnecessary conflicts that stem from the reticence to accepting change and transformation in one's own creed and society as a whole. The main consensus arrived at by the conversations between Bauman and Obirek, is that polyphony of conceptions of the good, and an open dialogue among these varied creeds is fundamental to our present social circumstances. In a world where physical distances are constantly shrinking, there is a need to search for a fusion of horizons, finding the commonalities between our ideologies, instead of stubbornly emphasising their differences. The role of religious traditions is fundamental in this respect. Instead of shunning away the reality of religion in contemporary society, we need to take the post-secular step, embracing the knowledge and wisdom that our ancient traditions have to offer.

In *On the World and Ourselves*, the discussion intends to find bridges that link our religious heritage with our secular present and its flaws. One main issue travels through all the

conversations: the benefits and dangers of the hegemony of social and economic individualism. Both authors agree that the freedoms and responsibilities bestowed by individualist thought are fundamental for the sustainment of our social world. But these same freedoms and responsibilities can lead us astray. The weight of individual responsibility steers people to looking for scapegoats to this burden. People turn to the flock, to populist ideologies, and to acquitting creeds as a way to hide from the consequences of their freedom. On the other hand, the belief in each individual's unrivalled right to freedom has led to the 'liquidisation' of social ties, and the disintegration of social consciousness. While the weak-hearted fall into the trap of flock syndromes due to their fear of bearing responsibility for their actions, the neoliberal way of life has attracted the consciousness of the rich and powerful; absolving them from their social responsibility by instilling in them the belief that each has to fend for himself.

The core concern of this exchange between Bauman and Obirek is understanding in what way an open and receptive dialogue between varied secular and religious view-points can overcome the apparent boundaries and obstacles that divide these ways of life. But the relevance of these conversations does not necessarily lie in the theoretical content that the books offer; it's fundamental value lies, rather, in the fact that the discussions work as a practical example of the potential of dialogue for bridging the apparent gap between world views. It is a dialogue about religion; it is a dialogue about personal and social histories; it is a dialogue about modernity, fundamentalisms, nationalisms, evils, and antagonisms; but, above all, it is a dialogue about dialogue. It is a ninety-year-old atheist with Jewish descent and a communist past discussing openly and serenely about god, politics, and ideologies with a theologian and devout Catholic who suffered the negative consequences of communism first-hand. It is living proof of how an open mind and the willingness to understand another person's point of view can lead to reconciling the plurality of world views through our common humanity.

These two books offer a fantastic take on the theory and practice of dialogue as an instrument to bridge the gap between differing views of the world. They do so by guiding the reader through theology, philosophy, history, and the past and present of the two thinkers. Due to the series being originally published for a Polish audience, these works offer, as well, an insider's look at the history and public sphere of Poland, through references to its literature, history, politics, and religious debates. Neither of the two should be taken as a concise and definite thesis on, or solution to, any of the themes treated in these conversations; rather as an experiment on the potential of dialogue for achieving a more open understanding of those who differ from us in their core beliefs about the world, and in how to solve its problems.